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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9243
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000880

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SUBJECT: ASHGABAT CONSULAR OUTREACH - SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW,
AND SOMETHING BORROWED

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11. SUMMARY: Over the last year, AmEmbassy Ashgabat looked for both traditional and creative opportunities to expand its consular outreach program. Working with other Embassy offices, notably Public Diplomacy and Peace Corps colleagues, the consular section has developed continuing programs to provide transparent, consistent, and accurate information about visa and consular services. Combining "old" techniques like fliers and town hall meetings, "new" techniques like introducing a direct visa information telephone line and conducting seminars for Peace Corps volunteers, and by "borrowing" other Posts' innovative best practices, Ashgabat continues to look for new opportunities to improve consular outreach. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND: OUTREACH IN TURKMENISTAN

12. In an environment of tight governmental information control (a moratorium on new Internet accounts was lifted only several months ago), consular outreach is a challenge. Many best practices that serve other Posts are not practical here. For example, given the limited Internet access, most Turkmenistanis have trouble accessing the Embassy website and many do not feel comfortable navigating the web for information. It has also been difficult to publicize visa changes and other consular news in the newspapers. Post cannot buy ad space. Embassy press releases must be sent far in advance via diplomatic note. A large number of applicants still find out about changes to the visa procedures by reading announcements posted on the public information board on the street outside the Embassy. Even as Post hopes to capitalize on future expanded internet usage and what we hope will be a more liberal press climate, Post anticipates continuing to rely on tried-and-true "old school" methods of communicating consular news through handouts and posters.

TOWN HALL MEETING: AMCITS - FEW, BUT ENGAGED

13. On August 8, Post held its first town hall meeting in years for the expatriate American community. All American citizens present in Turkmenistan were invited by Warden Message, along with adult foreign national dependents of registered Americans. The consular section followed up the invitation by calling every registered private American citizen to personally extend the invitation and ensure that the Warden Message had been received.

14. Although there are few private American citizens living in

Turkmenistan - and fewer during the summer, when American teachers from the Ashgabat International School are usually in the United States - the turnout was better than expected. Eight of the ten private American citizens present in Ashgabat attended, along with one foreign spouse and an equal number of Mission officers and family members.

15. During the meeting, the Charge welcomed the guests and gave a brief overview of U.S.-Turkmenistan relations. Post's newly arrived Deputy Chief of Mission was introduced, as was the new RSO, who gave a briefing on personal security tips. The Consular Chief discussed American citizen services issues, highlighting the benefits of practical training Post's ACS FSN received from a week spent shadowing colleagues at AmConsulate Frankfurt's Special Citizen Services and Passport sections. Overseas voting materials were distributed, including printouts of state-specific information. Finally, the consular chief discussed visa issues in general and offered suggestions of appropriate ways for American citizens to direct friends and contacts to visa information. The invitees were very engaged during the question and answer session, which lasted twice as long as the planned presentations. Based on feedback received from attendees, Post developed a strategy to better disseminate event information to resident American citizens.

VISA INFORMATION PROGRAM: IMPROVING ACCESS AND EFFICIENCY

16. In a country where it is hard to disseminate information through the media, people rely heavily on learning through word of mouth. The obvious downside, for consular information sharing, is that "word of mouth" is a notoriously inefficient way of spreading technical information and that information is often incorrect. In October 2006, coinciding with the rollout of EVAF, Post introduced a visa appointment system, as well as a visa information program to provide direct, transparent, manageable access to the consular section. Rededicating a seldom-used fax line, the consular section started a direct-dial Visa Information Line that is staffed 9 hours a week, responding to visa inquiries and appointment requests. Not

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only has the Visa Information Line been well received by applicants, but consular staff have found that having set hours to address public inquiries allows them to have predictable blocks of uninterrupted time to better meet other work goals.

17. Borrowing best practices shared by our colleagues from Embassy Dakar and Embassy Tbilisi, the Consular Section designed three sets of business cards for Embassy officers and staff to distribute to contacts. One card advertises the Visa Information Line, in English, Russian and Turkmen, providing the hours of operation and the consular section public email address. A supplementary card lists, in Turkmen and Russian, five steps to prepare for and obtain a visa appointment. A third card, in English, provides routine and emergency contact information for American Citizen Services. These cards allow Embassy officers, Peace Corps volunteers, and even private American citizens to direct visa and consular inquiries to the consular section without becoming inappropriately entangled in particular cases. The Visa Information line cards have been so popular that they are already in their sixth printing.

WORKSHOP FOR PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS

18. At any given time, the Peace Corps has more than 50 volunteers serving as health care educators and language teachers throughout Turkmenistan. Peace Corps volunteers (PCVs) often receive inquiries about visa issues. Recently, the consular section held a session for PCVs to provide techniques for responding to visa inquiries. After a general discussion of visa regulations, including section 214b of the Immigration and Nationality Act, PCVs performed role plays of common scenarios in which they might be approached for information or pressured for assistance. Several participants said that one scenario, where a school director attempted to pressure a PCV teacher to obtain a student visa for her adult son, matched their own experiences. Feedback from PCVs on the usefulness of this session has been very positive, and Post plans to repeat this program with incoming classes.

STUDENT VISA OUTREACH

19. This summer, the consular staff attended an educational fair sponsored by American Councils for International Exchanges (ACCELS) and IREX in Ashgabat, providing stacks of Visa Information Line and "5 Steps to Applying for a U.S. Visa" cards along with student visa specific handouts. Several weeks later, the consular chief gave a talk on student visas at the American Corner in Turkmenabat, the capital of Lebap province, attended by a standing-room crowd. Although consular staff was unable to attend ACCELS/IREX educational fairs in other provincial capitals, the consular section prepared packages of cards and handouts for fairs and American Corners throughout the country.

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